

## ***Beyond Doubt***

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
July 23, 2017  
Text: James 1:2-8

Doubt is a part of life each day. At least it is for most of us, I think. Doubt can be mundane like worrying about whether or not you locked the back door before you left the house. Doubt can be significant containing within it serious consequences if we do not handle it appropriately. The trick becomes, then, knowing whether the doubt you are experiencing is mundane or significant and to what extent you let the doubt, whatever kind it is, take control of your life. For example, if you become obsessed with whether or not you locked the back door, you may end up going back home to check, even if it makes you late for wherever you are heading. The consequences here, annoying as they may be, are often inconsequential. You have less time to shop or visit with whomever you were meeting. Not pleasant, but the course of your life is not altered by this kind of doubt given in to.

Unless of course going home to recheck the door causes you to miss a very important job interview. Then you cross the line into what I call significant doubt. Significant doubt has to do with worrying about something with real, life altering consequences. Should I take this new job about which I have concerns and doubts, or not? Is this new job worth the risk of upending my life,

or not? Are my doubts about this new job real, or a product of my fear of change in my very comfortable life? How do I know if I am making the right decision? What if I'm wrong? *That* is significant doubt where the decision to be made has real consequences.

When it comes to doubt, the real issue is how well we trust ourselves, our own wisdom, to make the right choice. Do I have enough confidence in myself to trust that I locked the back door because I *always* lock the back door and there is absolutely no reason to think I didn't lock it this time, or not? Do I trust my own ability to weigh out appropriately the pros and cons of this new job as presented to me and make the best decision for myself, or not? Ultimately our whole wrestling with this demon of doubt does come down to how much we trust, believe in, our own abilities. I'm not saying we don't consult with other people as we weigh how to respond to our doubts because we do. If someone is in the car with us as the potentially unlocked door looms large in our heads, we can voice our doubts to them and listen for their wisdom in return. Just hearing "I saw you lock that door before we left the house" or "I'm sure you locked it, you always do," can make all the difference in how we decide to respond to the doubt. So too can the friend who responds to our expressed doubt about the new job when he or she says, "I've heard great things about that company" or "it sounds like a great opportunity just perfect for you." But, ultimately, the choice of how to face down those

doubts is yours alone, as are the consequences of that choice, good and bad.

This whole dilemma of doubt in our everyday lives is exactly what James was talking about in the text we read this morning. We are tempted when we read texts about doubt in the bible to assume they are always talking about doubt when it comes to faith in God as in you either believe or you don't. Certainly, that is the point of the most famous text about doubting in the New Testament which is the story of Thomas, the disciple who was not present in the room when the Risen Jesus appeared to the disciples for the first time after his death and resurrection. When Thomas returned and heard what had happened he said he could not believe such an outlandish thing until he had seen the nail holes in Jesus' hands and feet and the spear hole in his side for himself. Sure enough, Jesus appears again and tells Thomas to put his finger in the holes if that is what it takes for him to believe. But Jesus also says that those who believe without seeing are the true believers.

Then, of course, there is a famous story of doubt in the Old Testament about Abraham and Sarah who remained childless into their nineties and yet still angels appear and tell them Sarah would have a child within the year. Sarah laughed and the angels were not happy since they took her laughter as an insult to God

and to their promise coming from God. She stopped laughing, and had a baby – Isaac – within the year.

So, we know doubt is part and parcel of the bible just like it is part and parcel of our lives. But this kind of doubt James is talking about in this morning's text is not the usual kind of doubt we're used to hearing about in biblical texts. Oh, it looks like it is on the surface. When we just look at the words, like "the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind," it looks like once again James is talking about having faith that God is God, that God's Son and our Savior is Jesus. But that's not really what James is talking about here. At least, not directly. James is talking about something much more practical here and that's what I'd like us to ponder together this morning.

The key to James' intent in this passage appears before the verses where he is talking about doubt specifically. "My brothers and sisters," he begins, "whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy." What? We should face trials and problems with joy? He can't possibly mean that, can he? Yes, he can. "... Consider it nothing but joy because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing." Responding to trials effectively makes us stronger. Okay. But how do we get from this point to doubt and its consequences? James is building his case and the next building

block in the bridge to doubt is the key one. “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly and it will be given you.” So, we are to pray and ask God for the wisdom we need in any given situation and God will give it to us. Well, okay, I guess. But will God really give me the wisdom I need when I need to face trials and confusion and difficult choices? Can I really count on that from God?

Absolutely! That’s James’ answer. “Ask in faith, *never doubting*,” he says, “for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.” That’s it! That’s what James is talking about when he is talking about doubt here. He is not talking about whether or not you have faith in God. He is talking about whether or not the faith you have in God is real enough, strong, enough, deep enough to make a difference in your life. Do you have enough faith in God to trust that when God places you in the midst of what James calls trials, difficult situations requiring difficult and even painful choices, do you have faith that God will provide the wisdom you need to make the best decision in the situation, or not? Do you trust in God enough to ask for God’s wisdom and have faith that God will provide all you need to face whatever circumstance you find yourself in, or not? In other words, James is asking if you can put your faith where your doubt is. Sure, you can say you believe in God, have faith in Jesus, but when the chips are down and you need to face challenging times,

make difficult decisions, does your faith translate into absolute confidence that God will provide the wisdom you need to make the best decision possible in that moment? Or do you doubt that God's wisdom for you is even part of the situation?

If you doubt that, if you doubt that God is even a part of the situation, the dilemma, the challenge, the trial you are facing, then how could it be possible for God to provide the wisdom you need? This is what James means when he talks about the doubter being "double-minded and unstable in every way." If you don't see God in a situation, if you worry that God is not in a situation, if you forget even to look for God in a challenge or trial, then how can you hope to receive God's wisdom for dealing with the situation as your best God-given, God-blessed, God-loved self? You can't, James says. Such a person, James says, "must not expect to receive anything from the Lord." Ouch, that's harsh, we think. A little doubt, a tiny question in my head, in my heart, means God won't help me? No. That's not what James is saying. Not at all.

James is actually saying the opposite. Of course, everyone has doubts when faced with a challenging situation, a difficult decision, a problem we'd rather ignore. That's just part of being human, James says. Trials happen, and they're upsetting. But don't stay in that moment of being upset. Move beyond it. Move beyond it into the realm of faith beyond doubt because an active, living faith is grounded in God-given wisdom is ours if only we

remember to ask God for it. Don't get stuck in doubt, caught up in the swirling waters of why is this happening to me, why doesn't God care about me, why doesn't this problem, this trial whatever it is just go away? Don't get pulled under by the double-mindedness of doubt that says do one thing one minute and something else in the next. Don't give in to that kind of doubt, James says. Trust God to provide the wisdom you need to do the right thing. Make your decision confident in God's love for you. And then do the hardest thing. Let that decision go. Give it back to God. All the doubts about the situation you are facing and how you choose to handle it, give it back to God and leave it there. To do that is faith. To do that is accepting fully and completely the wisdom of God revealed in the life God has gifted to you. To do that is to believe that whatever happens, it comes from God and God will show you the way forward and give you the courage to walk it, no matter what.

This is the path of faith which moves beyond doubt to the life God intended for you from before you were born. Pray about the situation. Investigate the possibilities, acknowledge your feelings. Write it all down if that helps. Tell a trusted friend if that helps. Write a letter to Jesus about it if that helps, and then place that letter in your bible and leave it there, in God's hands.

And, dear friends, know that not making a decision that needs to be made is a decision. It is a decision to give in to doubt.

It is a decision to forgo the possibilities God has placed before you because you are afraid to do the wrong thing. That kind of fear, of doubt, is paralyzing, keeping you wrapped up in the thralls of doubt and despair. Now be clear that I am not saying you shouldn't take your time with a decision about a challenge before you. Sometimes sitting on something for a while is the best way to create space for God's wisdom to emerge from the fog. But you can't sit on something forever. You can't pull a Scarlett O'Hara and say, "I won't think about that today. I'll think about that tomorrow," if you are never going to let tomorrow dawn. You can't be Annie forever singing "I love you tomorrow, you're always a day away." Sounds like a good idea. But it doesn't solve anything. It will never move you beyond the self-doubt that keeps you trapped.

So, dear friends, on this warm summer morning, I invite you to receive with open hands and open hearts this wonderful gift of God that our friend James has reminded us of this morning. God has already gifted you with all you need to negotiate the trials and challenges of life. Trust that when doubt threatens to overwhelm you, God is already there, ready to carry you to a place beyond doubt, if only you will let God into the situation and trust that God's wisdom will prevail. All you need to do is get out of the way. Amen.